

CONSUMER PERSONALITY-PRODUCT IMAGE CONGRUENCE: EVIDENCE FROM TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the congruence between consumer personalities and product images based on the self-congruity perspective. In addition, consumer personality-product image congruence was examined to determine its influences on consumer product preference. Data were obtained from 335 respondents recruited from the customers of furniture stores such as IKEA and HOLA in Taiwan. A between-subjects experimental design was used, with t-tests and regression analysis. The finding showed that 6 TABP consumers prefer products with a hard product image that gives strong, tough and strict feeling that is congruent with their own personality characteristics such as pressure for vocational advancement, aggressiveness, and desire for competitive achievement. In addition, TBBP consumers prefer products with a soft product image giving a mild, pleasant and gentle feeling, congruent with their own personality characteristics such as accommodating attitude, cooperativeness, and an easy going approach to life. In practice, determining how the consumer personality-product image congruence affects consumer product preference is helpful to manufacturers in designing products and stimulating product sales.

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KEYWORDS: Personality, product image, product preference, self-congruity.

INTRODUCTION

Functionality is not the end of product design; aesthetics are vital. Current trends in product design are moving toward the aesthetic aspects of products, such as their shape, color, and image (Krippendorff, 1995). Finn (1985) defined product image as the symbolic associations that are gathered into the product design. In terms of business activity, a primary task of product image design consists of attracting consumer preference. Researchers (e.g., Belk, 1988; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982) indicate that based on the self-congruity perspective, consumers prefer products congruent with their self-concept. In addition, based on the self-congruity perspective, Govers and Schoormans (2005) found that consumers prefer brands and products whose product personality characteristics are congruent with their own personality characteristics.

Based on the above rationale, the purpose of this study is to explore the congruence between consumer personalities and product images based on the self-congruity perspective. For manufacturers, consumer personality-product image congruence may address consumer preferences at the product design stage. Thus, a secondary purpose of this research is exploring how consumer personality-product image congruence influences consumer preference. The findings of this study may provide suggestions for manufacturers creating product images as a way to attract a diversity of customers and stimulate product sales.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Allport (1937), who identified 50 definitions of personality, defined personality as: "...the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment" (p.48). Personality is also defined as the consistent patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving (Pervin & John, 1997).

The relationship between personality variables and consumer behavior has generated academic interest since marketing first became the subject of scholarly research. Studies have shown that personality is related to such aspects of consumer behavior as purchasing behavior, media choice, innovation, segmentation, fear, social influence, product choice, opinion leadership, risk taking, and attitude change. Several theoretical personality systems that emphasize the importance of consumer orientation have been constructed. Most notable of these are the Big Five, Sixteen Personality Factor and Internals/Externals personality, and the Type A behavior pattern (TABP). Friedman and Rosenman (1974) defined the Type A behavior pattern as “an action-emotion complex that can be observed in any person who is aggressively involved in a chronic, incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time, and if required to do so, against the opposing efforts of other things or other persons” (p. 67). TABP is a model of how a person considers events and information when she/he confronts a challenge (Ivancevich, Matteson, & Preston, 1982). TABP assigns individuals traits such as competitive achievement striving, hostility, impatience, motor mannerisms, pressure for vocational productivity (Sales, 1969). The opposite behavior pattern is known as the Type B behavior pattern (TBBP). TBBP refers to the relative absence of the traits of TABP and a more relaxed way of handling affairs (Contrada, 1989). People manifesting TBBP are more relaxed, seldom become impatient, are not easily irritated, and take more time to enjoy vocational pursuits (Sales, 1969).

Product image has a strong impact on consumer/user preferences and product choice (Chuang, Chang & Hsu, 2001). Image has been seen as the sum of all meanings the consumer experiences with the product (Martineau, 1957). Finn (1985) defines product image as the symbolic associations of a product. Kosslyn (1983) describes image ‘as a representation in the mind that gives rise to the experience of “seeing” in the absence of the appropriate stimulation from the eye’ (p.29). Such seeing may be deliberately manipulated by marketing experts, for example, by repackaging old products to re-present them as young, changing the image, not the product. Image is thus the non-physical aspects of the product that are associated with the product, such as brands, marketing symbols, celebrity endorsements, and country of origin (Erickson, Johansson & Chao, 1984). Researchers also refer to product images residing at a variety of levels of abstraction in the memory (Poiesz, 1989).

Though the above definitions are broadly similar, the consumer behavior literature does not appear to offer a generally accepted definition of image. Nevertheless, researchers have found that most products include both hard and soft images (e.g., Hsiao & Chen, 1997; Hsiao & Chen, 2006). Hsiao and Chen (2006), in a study of product images of a sofa, used two words for image, hard and soft. Hard product images give consumers a strong, tough and strict feeling. Soft product images give a mild, pleasant and gentle feeling.

Sirgy (1982) described self-congruity as the way consumers make a psychological comparison between their image of themselves, their self-concept, and the image of a product. An individual’s self-concept consists of stable self-assessments, including personality attributes, self-knowledge of skills and abilities, occupation and hobbies, and self-awareness of one’s physical attributes (Fleming & Courtney, 1984). Self-congruity has two elements, self-concept and product image. Consumer self-congruity is a preference for products whose image is similar to their self-concept (e.g., Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Self-congruity stems from the human need to exhibit a consistent and positive view of the self. Product choices are one way individuals can display their self-concepts to themselves and others (Sirgy, 1982).

Govers & Schoormans (2005) found that consumers prefer products and brands whose personality characteristics are congruent with their own. Consumers express and enhance their self-concept by consuming products that evoke positive product user stereotypes for them, and avoiding products that evoke negative stereotypes. According to Pervin and John (1997), self-concept is often viewed as a component of personality. The features of TABP have been identified by Sales (1969) as personality traits which consist of pressures for vocational advancement, aggressiveness, competitive achievement striving, and impatience. This study posits that, according to the self-congruity perspective, there should be congruence between TABP and Hsiao and Chen’s (2006) hard product image. Namely, consumers manifesting TABP should prefer hard product images, since such an image resembles their personalities.

The TBBP individual has an accommodating attitude, is cooperative, not easily irritated, and has an easygoing approach to life (Sales, 1969). This study thus proposes that there should be congruence between TBBP and Hsiao and Chen's (2006) soft product image, based on the self-congruity perspective. TBBP consumers should prefer products with a mild, gentle and pleasant feeling. Thus, based on the self-congruity perspective, it is hypothesized:

H1a When the product manifests a hard product image, TABP consumers will perceive a higher degree of consumer personality-product image congruence than when the product manifests a soft product image.

H1b When the product manifests a soft product image, TBBP consumers will perceive a higher degree of consumer personality-product image congruence than when the product manifests a hard product image.

Urban and Hauser (1993) observed that marketing researchers use a range of techniques for evaluating and predicting consumer preferences, including choice, rating, ranking and matching. Researchers (e.g., Belk, 1988; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982) indicate that self-congruity strongly affects consumption behaviors such as consumer preference, purchase intention and product loyalty. The present study proposes that, based on self-congruity perspective, congruence between consumer personality and product image affects product preference. It is hypothesized:

H2 The degree to which consumers perceive consumer personality-product image congruence is positively associated with product preference.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Hsiao and Chen (2006), investigating the product image of sofas, found both a hard and soft product image. The present study uses sofas as its experimental product to assess these product images. Participants consisted of individuals who were shopping for sofas from furniture shops in Taiwan, such as IKEA and HOLA.

Each participant was asked to complete a questionnaire with two experimental settings, a sofa manifesting a hard product image and a sofa manifesting a soft product image. In total, 335 individuals (N = 335) completed the survey. The sample was 43.9% male (n = 147) and 56.1% female (n = 188).

The questionnaire included the following variables: Type A behavior pattern, consumer personality-product image congruence, consumer preference, age, and product image. The Type A behavior pattern was measured using scales developed and validated by Begley and Boyd (1985) to measure consumer personality. Owing to cross-cultural issues, this study chose 6 items from Begley and Boyd's (1985) instrument, which originally had 21 items, to fit Chinese culture. These six items included "I eat faster than other people," "I like to keep two jobs moving forward at the same time," "Feels like hurrying speaker," "I often set my own deadlines," "Others rate me as hard-driving and competitive," and "Others agree-more energy than most people". Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: Strongly disagree and 5: Strongly agree. Cronbach's α for this scale for the current sample was .76.

Product-personality congruence scale was used to measure the congruence between consumer personalities and product images. Three items adapted from the product-personality congruence scale developed by Govers and Schoormans (2005) were used. The three items included "This sofa's product image matches my own personality," "If you consider your own personality and compare it to the description of this sofa's product image, to some extent are they similar," and "This sofa's product image is like my own personality". Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with anchors 1: Strongly disagree and 5: Strongly agree. In this study, Cronbach's α was 0.93 for this scale.

Consumer preferences scale was used to measure consumer preferences such as choice, rating, ranking and matching. The scale was measured using three items adapted from the consumer preference scale developed by Govers and Schoormans (2005). The three items included “I would like to have this sofa,” “I think this sofa is attractive me,” and “I think this sofa is a good product”. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: Strongly disagree and 5: Strongly agree. Cronbach's α for this scale in the current sample was .92.

Yang and Allenby (2003) indicated that age may influence consumer preferences. Preferences could change as time goes by. The product images preferred by the young may differ greatly from those preferred by the old. Therefore, age serves as a control variable in this study.

The product image messages for the participants included two experimental conditions representing different product images. In this study, product image manipulations (i.e., hard product image vs. soft product image) were adopted from Hsiao and Chen's (2006) study. In this study, the hard product image manipulation was presented to the participants as a sofa picture identified as hard product image in Hsiao and Chen's (2006) study. According to Hsiao and Chen's (2006) study, a hard product image gives people a strong, tough and strict feeling. Similarly, the soft product image manipulation was presented to the participants as a sofa picture identified as a soft product image in Hsiao and Chen's (2006) study. According to Hsiao and Chen's (2006) study, a soft product image gives people a mild, pleasant and gentle feeling.

RESULTS

In order to assess whether the hard and soft product images were perceived as intended, a manipulation check was done. Participants were asked one question, matching the answer to the product image message they had read. The answer was either right or wrong. Further, a Chi-square test was conducted, indicating a significant result ($\chi^2=242.5$, $p<0.01$). There were significant differences in the frequency of correct and incorrect responses. This suggests that the manipulation of product images was successful and that respondents correctly identified the emphasis that the product image messages were designed to convey.

For hypotheses (*H1a* and *b*), a t-test analysis was used to examine the congruence relationship between consumer personalities and product images. TABP consumers scored significantly higher (t -value = 2.17, $p<0.05$) on consumer personality-product image congruence for the hard product image ($M = 3.26$, $SD. = 1.1$) than for the soft product image ($M = 3.06$, $SD. = 1.0$). Thus, *H1a* is supported.

Similarly, TBBP consumers scored significantly higher (t -value = 4.0, $p<0.01$) on consumer personality-product image congruence for soft product images ($M = 3.20$, $SD. = 0.9$) than hard ($M = 2.81$, $SD. = 0.8$). Thus, *H1b* is supported.

To test Hypothesis 2, the authors used regression analysis. The following regression equation was estimated to identify the determinants of Consumer product preference.

$$\text{Consumer Product Preference} = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{Age}) + \beta_2(\text{Consumer Personality-Product Image Congruence}). \quad (1)$$

Table 1 shows the results of adding the control variable (i.e., age) to Model 1, and adding the independent variable (i.e., consumer personality-product image congruence) to Model 2. The association between the independent variable (i.e., consumer personality-product image congruence) and the dependent variable (i.e., product preference) behaved as expected ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, *H2* was supported.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigates the congruence between consumer personalities and product images based on the self-congruity perspective. *H1a* is supported by the results, indicating that TABP consumers prefer

products with a hard product image that gives strong, tough and strict feeling that is congruent with their own personality characteristics such as pressure for vocational advancement, aggressiveness, and desire for competitive achievement.

H1b is also supported by the results, indicating that TBBP consumers prefer products with a soft product image giving a mild, pleasant and gentle feeling, congruent with their own personality characteristics such as accommodating attitude, cooperativeness, and an easy going approach to life.

H2 is supported by the results. As expected, consumer personality-product image congruence was positively related to consumer product preference. This result corroborates the findings of previous studies (e.g., Belk, 1988; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982) indicating that self-congruity has a significant influence on consumer preference, purchase intention, ownership, use and product loyalty.

The findings of this study may provide manufacturers with suggestions on how to design and market products to stimulate product preference and product sales. When manufacturers design product images for their products, they should strategize the development of their product images by aiming them at consumer personality types.

This study has some limitations. While the literature has various categories of personalities and product images, the present study focused primarily on Type A/B behavior patterns and hard/soft product images congruence. Future research might investigate congruence between other personality characteristics and other specific product images which are not discussed in this study.

Table 1: Regression Analysis Results

Consumer Product Preference		
	Model 1	Model 2
Step 1:		
Age	-0.024	-0.077
Step 2:		
Consumer personality-product image		0.534***
R²	0.001	0.283
ΔR²	0.001	0.282
F value	0.191	65.523***

*This table shows the results of adding the control variable (i.e., age) to Model 1, and adding the independent variable (i.e., consumer personality-product image congruence) to Model 2. The relationship between the independent variable (i.e., consumer personality-product image congruence) and the dependent variable (i.e., product preference) is positive ($\beta = 0.53, p < 0.001$).
***, **, and * indicate significance at the 1, 5 and 10 percent levels respectively.*

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